Bird Track Springs Fish Habitat Enhancement Project

Scenery Report

Prepared by Andrew Steele
La Grande Ranger District Recreation Specialist

Visuals / Scenery Resources

Executive Summary

The no action alternative would not address the conditions that are detrimental to anadromous fish habitat, nor would it move the aquatic ecosystem toward the desired condition.

Alternatives 2 would move the area toward desired future conditions while keeping effects to scenic integrity to a minimum, meeting all standards.

The vegetation management objectives would be achieved without creating unnatural appearing forms, lines or colors in the long-term. The river realignment and associated management activities would create no openings that are dissimilar to existing openings in the area, therefore the retention visual quality objectives (VQO) of the Grande Ronde River Road viewshed would be maintained.

Introduction

Scenery provides the setting for all activities experienced by forest visitors. Each setting is comprised of scenic attributes that are derived by the environmental context of topography, geology, and climate. These underlying factors are expressed and highlighted by the scenic attributes that they support. Scenery, just as any other resource, must be cared for and managed for future generations. The activities proposed by the Bird Track Springs Fish Habitat Enhancement Project (Bird Track) potentially affect the current and future condition of these valued scenic resources. Managing scenery resources involves the process of analyzing effects, implementing scenic character goals and applying scenic conservation design features to achieve the WWNF Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) desired conditions and direction for scenery resources.

The Grande Ronde River Road (Highway 244) runs through the project area. This road was identified as a Level 1 viewshed in the Forest Plan, indicating its importance as a major recreational travel route with an essentially natural appearance. Activities that are within this project are expected to meet the retention VQO.

The primary purpose of this section is to disclose the effects of the alternatives to scenery resources.

Regulatory Framework. The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) states that it is the "continuing responsibility of the Federal Government to use all practicable means to assure for all Americans, aesthetically and culturally pleasing surroundings." NEPA also requires "A systematic and interdisciplinary approach which would insure the integrated use of the natural and social sciences and the environmental design arts into planning and decision-making which may have an impact on man's environment."[1] To accomplish this, numerous Federal laws require all Federal land management agencies to consider scenery and aesthetic resources in land management planning, resource planning, project design, implementation, and monitoring.

Several USDA handbooks have been developed to establish a framework for management of visual resources, including, but not limited to:

National Forest Landscape Management Volume 2, Chapter 1 the Visual Management System (Agriculture Handbook 462, USDA Forest Service 1974) and

Landscape Aesthetics, A Handbook for Scenery Management (Agriculture Handbook 701, USDA Forest Service 1995).

This evaluation applies current National Forest Scenery Management methodology in conjunction with existing Wallowa-Whitman National Forest (WWNF) Plan direction. This includes scenery sustainability concepts described in Scenery Management System (SMS) Handbook Appendix J – Recommended SMS Refinements. It relies on field studies and photography from inventoried sensitive viewpoints and other views of the project area, as well as coordination with project interdisciplinary team (ID Team) members, and consideration of public preferences for scenic quality. Cumulative scenic quality was within the geographic scope of roadways and other viewpoints within and adjacent to the project.

Integration of this scenery analysis assures the Bird Track Project is consistent with scenery-related Wallowa-Whitman National Forest direction, Forest Service (FS) policies, and applicable elements of FS Visual Management and Scenery Management systems. Refer to Appendix B of the Scenery Management System Handbook #701 for a complete list of references requiring Forest Service management of scenery and aesthetics.

Overview of Issues Addressed

Issue Indicators

The two indicators used to measure the effects to scenery resources are scenic integrity and scenic stability. These two indicators evaluate the intensity and duration of effects as well as the degree to which the alternatives would affect the stability of scenery attributes over the long term.

Scenic Integrity is the degree to which the scenery is free from visible disturbances that detract from the natural and socially valued appearance, including disturbances due to human activities or extreme natural events inconsistent with the historic range of variability.

Scenic Stability is the degree to which the Desired Scenic Character can be sustained through time and ecological progression (Landscape Aesthetics, USDA 1995).

Affected Environment

Existing Condition

Existing Scenic Integrity

Scenic Integrity is measured on the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest through Visual Quality Objective levels defined by the FS Visual Management System's Chapter 1 USDA Handbook # 462. These levels and descriptors of how people perceive them are shown below.

Table 1. Visual Quality Objectives and Perceived Alteration

Visual Quality Objectives	Scenic Integrity as people perceive it
Preservation	Unaltered , visually complete or intact
Retention	Unnoticeably altered
Partial Retention	Slightly altered
Modification	Moderately altered
Maximum Modification	Heavily altered
Unacceptable Modification	Unacceptably altered

The existing scenic integrity meets the visual quality objective of the Forest Plan. Within the USFS portion of the project area there are some evidences of past activities. Rock quarries, ditches, dikes, and abandoned roadbeds are visible from the primary travel route. However, there are large areas of natural appearing landscapes. Overall, from middleground and background views there is little evidence of man's activities in this portion of the project area.

Sensitive Viewsheds

Hwy 244 – This road runs east to west through the project area. With a few exceptions, the road stays at river grade, and in a portion of the project the road is adjacent to the south bank of the Grande Ronde. From the road, travelers can frequently observe the course of the river. In areas where the river itself is not visible, the riparian area is obvious, dominated by large cottonwoods, willows, and open meadows. On the south side of the road, the terrain trends uphill, sometimes steeply, onto heavily forested benches. To the north of the road, slopes and small rocky escarpments descend to the river grade, and are dominated by open, south-facing, parklike stands of ponderosa pine.

The portion of the project area with USFS boundaries is primarily natural appearing, though there are some evidences of disturbance, as mentioned above. The evidences are subordinate in the landscape, and may not be readily apparent to the casual visitor who is traveling through in a vehicle. Elsewhere in the project area, there are substantial human developments and modifications visible from the road. These developments and modifications include but are not strictly limited to: corrals, fences, homes, barns and outbuildings, agricultural equipment, and a shooting range.

Desired Condition

Forest Plan Direction

Forest Goals- Landscape Management: To manage all National Forest lands to obtain the highest possible visual quality, commensurate with other appropriate public uses, cost and benefits.

Standards and Guidelines

1. VQO's. Meet visual quality objective through management techniques described in National Forest Landscape Management, Volumes 1 and 2, and the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest Visual Management Plan (Visual Management System, 1974, Wallowa-Whitman National Forest Land and resource Management Plan, 1995).
2. Retention Foreground. In retention foregrounds the area regenerated per decade should not exceed 7 percent or be less than 3 percent of the suitable forest land within the viewshed. Maximum seen area disturbed at any one time should not exceed 10 percent within any viewshed. Limit regeneration unit size to that which meets retention and desired

character including consideration of future entries and regrowth. The approximate range of sizes necessary to accomplish this is ½ to 2 acres in the immediate foreground (less than 500 feet) and 3 to 5 acres in the foreground greater than 500 feet from the road or trail. Units against road or trail edges should be shelterwoods or selection cuts rather than clearcuts. Target tree size is 36 inches where biologically feasible. (Note: Seen area disturbance requires visible evidences of disturbance that do not meet the VQO from a singular viewing platform identified as Sensitivity Level 1 roads.)

3. Partial Retention Foreground and Retention Middleground. In partial retention foreground and retention middleground, the area regenerated per decade should not exceed 9 percent or be less than 5 percent of the suitable forest land within and viewshed. The maximum seen area disturbed at any one time should not exceed 14 percent of any viewshed. Limit regeneration unit size to that which meets partial retention and desired character including consideration of future entries and regrowth. The approximate range of sizes necessary to accomplish this is ½ to 2 acres in the immediate foreground (less than 500 feet) and 3 to 5 acres in the foreground greater than 500 feet from the road or trail. Target size tree in foreground is 26 inches where biologically feasible.
4. Partial Retention Middleground. In partial retention middleground, the area regenerated per decade should range between 8 and 10 percent. Limit maximum regeneration unit size to 10 acres. Maximum area disturbed at any one time should not exceed 20 percent.
5. Created Openings. Consider a created opening to no longer be an opening, visually, when trees reach 20 feet in height. Rotation periods will be sufficient to grow large tree character in viewshed foregrounds.
6. Resolving Conflicts. Where conflicts develop between visual quality objectives and timber or range management objectives, these conflicts will be resolved in favor of meeting the visual objectives. Where conflicts occur between old-growth objectives and visual objectives, old –growth will have priority.
7. Viewshed Plans – Plans will be prepared for all Level 1 viewsheds that will refine boundaries, establish protect design criteria, and identify opportunities for scenic enhancement, and set entry priorities and timing (Wallowa-Whitman National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, 1995).

Effects of Action Alternative

River Realignment – In the short term, there would be substantial visual impacts from active river realignment and associated activities, both on private and USFS lands. Heavy machinery, dust, slash and log piles, temporary river crossings, and disturbed ground would be obvious to travelers along Hwy 244 and to recreationists within the project area. Large canopy trees may be felled for in-stream placements, giving a slightly more open overall appearance to certain stretches of the riparian zone. Large wood placements, beaver dam analogs, and access routes through the project area would take approximately 2-5 years to be obscured by new vegetation and gain a more natural appearance. Temporary parking areas and staging sites would affect the scenic integrity of the roadway in the short term, but would either be rehabilitated or absorbed into new recreational features at the conclusion of the project.

Corral Relocation – The Lowe Ranch corrals adjacent to Hwy 244 would be relocated to the south side of the road. Short-term visual impacts from this activity would include dust and machinery, both as the new corrals are being built and as the old corrals are being disassembled. Long-term visual impacts from this activity would include a larger corral footprint in the new location and tree removal adjacent to the new pasture on the Lowe Ranch property.

Timber Harvest – Proposed timber harvest activities on the Lowe Ranch property are either in the distant background or out of view from Hwy 244, and are not expected to effect the scenic integrity of the Level 1 viewshed.

Design Features and Mitigation Measures

Effects of the action alternatives are based on the full implementation of the following mitigation measures to minimize the effects of management activities:

- Where practical, screen landings from Hwy 244.
- Limit naturally shaped openings to be a maximum of 5 to 10 acres in size with blended edges. In areas of Retention and Partial Retention in both Middle and Background from Hwy 244.
- New temporary roads and landings may be evident but should remain subordinate to the shape and pattern of the natural appearing forest canopy. In areas of Retention and Partial Retention foreground from Hwy 244.
- In areas of Retention foreground as seen from Hwy 244, skid patterns, slash, soil exposure and stumps should be visually minor or unnoticed (4" maximum height of stumps).
- Cut stumps at a height less than 4" that are within 100' of Hwy 244.
- Where practical, slash piles shall not be located within the immediate Foreground (100') of Hwy 244.

Cumulative Effects

Alternative 1 – No Action

Continuing trends of increased understory vegetation would reduce views in and through the forest at the eye level in foreground views and thus reducing the diversity of color and texture available to viewers.

Alternative 2

Scenery

Project	Potential Effects	Overlap in:		Measurable Cumulative Effect?	Effects
		Time	Space		
Noxious Weed Management W-W Invasive Species Treatment ROD	Reduction of invasive species competition	Yes	Yes	No	
Vegetation		Yes	Yes	Yes	Machinery, smoke, and dust

Project	Potential Effects	Overlap in:		Measurable Cumulative Effect?	Effects
		Time	Space		
Management: Birdtrack Springs Precommercial thinning and prescribed burning					would cumulatively effect work being done as part of fish habitat project.
Special Uses: • OTEC Powerline • Fly Fishing O/G Permit		Yes	Yes	No	
Recreation – BTS Interpretive Trail		Yes	Yes	No	
Recreation- Dispersed Camping		Yes	Yes	No	
Recreation- Snowmobile Trails		No	No		
Recreation -Firewood Cutting		Yes	Yes	No	
Recreation – OHV Use		Yes	Yes	No	
Recreation – BTS Campground		Yes	Yes	No	
Roads & Trails – Travel Management Plan		Yes	Yes	No	
Road Maintenance On Hwy 244		Yes	Yes	Yes	Machinery and road building materials would cumulatively effect scenery from 244 viewshed.
Roads – Danger Tree Removal		Yes	Yes	No	
Grazing Allotment – Spring Creek Sheep Allotment		Yes	Yes	No	
Fisheries Enhancement – Fish logs from BTS Campground		Yes	Yes	Yes	Temp road construction, smoke, and machinery would have a cumulative effect.
Wildlife Enhancement – GG Owl Platforms Aspen Enhancement		Yes	Yes	No	
Mining		No	No	No	No approved plans of operation
Private Land Activities • Private Structures • Roads • Grazing		Yes	Yes	No	

Summary of Effects The action alternative meets Forest Plan VQOs. The alternative retains the existing VQOs and therefore meet the Forest Plan Standards and Guides for Scenery.

Compliance with Forest Plan and Other Relevant Laws, Regulations, Policies and Plans

Alternative 1 is compliant with the Visual Quality Objectives that are Forest Plan Standards.

It is expected that Alternative 2 would not reduce the scenic integrity and thus retain the existing visual quality objective standards established in the Forest Plan.